

Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi



Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1440/1460, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection



1 A Long Journey

As told in the Gospels of the New Testament, the life of Jesus began with his extraordinary yet humble birth in Bethlehem. Shepherds and three Magi (wise men from the East) visited the manger where Jesus was born to pay their respects. *The Adoration of the Magi* depicts the moment when the three wise men, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, kneel before the infant. The story of the Magi was particularly popular in

Florence, Italy, in the fifteenth century. The journey of the three wise men was often depicted in Florentine art and reenacted in Epiphany processions through the city.

In Renaissance Italy, religious images, from large altarpieces for churches to small paintings for private devotion in homes, were the mainstay of artists' workshops. At the time, not all common people could read. Stories from the Bible were reproduced in paintings filled with symbols that viewers could easily understand.

“When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.” Matthew 2:10 – 11



2 Look Around

The Adoration of the Magi is one of the first examples of a *tondo* (Italian for “round painting”), a popular form for religious paintings in the 1400s. The figures, views of the distant city, and the landscape are all arranged to make the best use of the panel’s round shape. A joyful procession of more than a hundred people winds its way down a steep path from the upper right. The line of men and women wraps around the rocky outcropping and enters the city through the arched gateway.

Look closely to find:

Horses, a pheasant, an ox, camels, a dog, and a peacock: Which creature stands out from the crowd? Perched on the roof of the stable, the magnificent peacock was a symbol of immortality.

A bearded man in red: The Magi found their way to Bethlehem by following a bright star. Although the star is not shown in the painting, its presence is indicated by the bearded man on a black horse. He gazes toward the star in the sky and raises his arms in awe.

A pomegranate: Sitting on his mother’s lap, the infant Jesus raises his right hand to bless the Magi. In his left hand he holds a pomegranate. Its numerous seeds represent the many people who were brought together by the Christian Church.

Gold: Artists used precious gold leaf to draw attention to the most significant figures in the painting. Jesus, his mother Mary, and Joseph have gold halos. Golden embroidery on their rose, blue, and red robes as well as the glistening aura around their heads help to identify the Magi.

3 Two Artists

More than one artist painted *The Adoration of the Magi*. Although it is unsigned, scholars generally agree that it was created by two master artists in Florence: the Dominican friar Fra Angelico (c. 1395–1455) and the Carmelite monk Fra Filippo Lippi (c. 1406–1469). It is not known, however, how the two artists came to work on the same painting. The *tondo* was in the collection of the Medici, a wealthy family of art patrons in fifteenth-century Florence. Both Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi regularly created paintings for the powerful Medici family.

One idea is that the older artist, Fra Angelico, designed the composition and began the painting, but for some reason he was unable to complete the project. The painting was then turned over to Lippi to finish. It likely remained in the studio of one artist for several years, and assistants may have worked on it. Art historians who study the unique painting style of each artist believe Lippi painted the Magi, while Fra Angelico was responsible for the face of Mary.

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If It Glitters... It Might Be Gold!

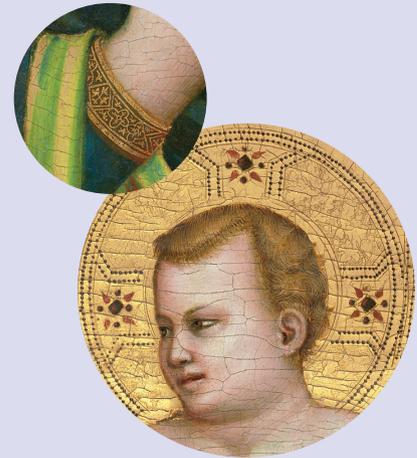
Gold, one of the most precious metals, has been used by artists around the world. In Renaissance Italy, gold was incorporated into religious paintings to indicate a holy presence or figure and to symbolize the timeless realm of heaven.

Most Italian art created in the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries has a religious theme. It is important to remember that these works were not intended to be hung in a museum—instead, they were made for devotional purposes and decorated churches, private chapels, and homes. When the gold decoration was illuminated by candles, the effect was dazzling.



Giotto, *Madonna and Child*, probably 1320/1330, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection

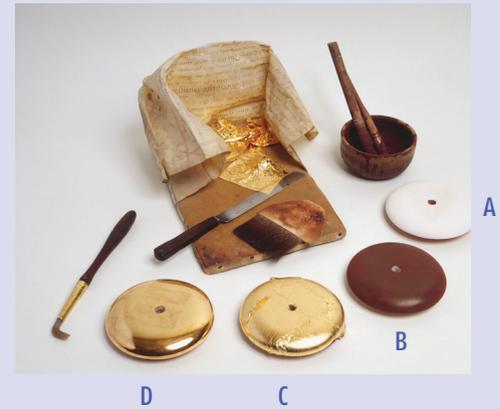
Made by the Florentine artist Giotto (c. 1266–1337), this painting was the central part of a multipaneled altarpiece. The background is gold leaf.



Painting on Panels

A wooden support, or panel, often of white poplar, lies below most paintings created in Italy in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. The panel was covered with size (glue made from animal skin), which kept the paint from soaking into the wood. A bright white gesso (a plaster ground) was applied next. Artists painted with pigments (powdered color) mixed with water and egg, which resulted in bright colors.

For the gold areas of a painting, diluted bole (a reddish-brown clay) was brushed onto the gesso surface. This provided a cushion for the delicate gold leaf (pieces of gold hammered extremely thin). Gold leaf was carefully applied in small sections and then smoothed and polished with a burnisher (a tool with a tip of hard stone). This gave the gold a brilliant, shining surface that could then be tooled (punched with a metal stamp) to create designs and patterns.



Materials and tools used in gilding, including pestle and mortar, knives, bole, and gold leaf (photo: Edward Woodman)

- A Step 1: Gesso ground
- B Step 2: Bole
- C Step 3: Gold leaf, applied in layers
- D Step 4: Gold leaf, smoothed with a burnisher